

HENK DRIESSEN

Institute for Cultural Anthropology, University of Nijmegen, Nijmegen

## **PRE- AND POST-BRAUDELIAN CONCEPTIONS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA. THE PUZZLE OF BOUNDARIES**

This contribution discusses some uses of the Mediterranean label by Mediterranean people themselves and confronts them with the dominant academic construct of Mediterranean unity and diversity.

Keywords: the Mediterranean, boundaries, unity, diversity

### **Introduction**

While preparing the conference version of this article, I read a report about Zagreb by *The Guardian* journalist Brian Logan. Praising the combined attractions of the "lost glory of Central Europe" and "the Mediterranean life spirit" of being able to drink always and everywhere a cup of coffee, he compared Belgrade to Madrid and Zagreb to Barcelona, at least an opposition, so he claims, in the eyes of the inhabitants who really wish to prove how dynamic and European they are, opposed to what they see as backward Serbs. The question is whether the inhabitants of Zagreb recognize themselves in this journalist's profile of their city. Or did he create yet another stereotypical image? However this may be, it is striking indeed how casually this journalist uses the terms 'Europe' and 'Mediterranean'.

As anthropologists or ethnologists we cannot afford such a cavalier attitude towards basic cultural categories. This contribution discusses some uses of the Mediterranean label by Mediterranean people themselves and confronts them with the dominant academic construct of Mediterranean unity and diversity.

### **The politics of local Mediterranean constructs**

When I first saw the conference question: "Where does the Mediterranean begin", I thought the region obviously and precisely begins at the Mediterranean sea and shores. But this simple observation already raises a number of questions, some of which I will address below.

For me, personally, the Mediterranean began when I first read Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. It is not an exaggeration to state that this work became a catalyst in the Anglo-American debate on the status of the Mediterranean as a unit of anthropological research, almost immediately upon its translation into English in the early 1970s and in spite of the fact that it was a work by a historian. It offered a wide frame of reference for *local* anthropological research, a much more sophisticated frame than the 'culture area' construct.

I remember very lively how this *magnum opus* with its evocative style and sweep of erudition made a great impression upon me when I was student in anthropology preparing for my first fieldwork in Spain in 1974. It added an analytic Mediterranean dimension to my local research in the mountainous north of Córdoba province, notwithstanding the fact that my fieldwork site was indeed far removed from the Mediterranean sea, almost 300 kilometers by often tortuous road. Only very few villagers had been to the sea. On the other hand, an ambulant fishmonger brought fresh fish from the Mediterranean to the village two or three times a week. The sea was drawn into the horizon of the villagers indirectly by way of relatives and neighbours who migrated to the Costa del Sol to take part in the construction and tourist boom of the 1960s and early 1970s. But changes went fast. Only a decade later, many village youngsters had already visited the Mediterranean beaches, not for labour but for fun. But even then 'Mediterranean' was not a daily category of orientation, let alone self-definition, in this interior part of Andalusia.

Although my second fieldwork in 1977-1978 took me to the plains south of the city of Córdoba, closer to the sea, 'Mediterranean' again played a very marginal role in the worldview of the agro-towndwellers. It is true that more plainspeople than mountandwellers had seen the sea. Yet, 'Mediterranean' was not a relevant frame of reference in their daily lives. To be sure, the fact that the Mediterranean sea hardly figures in the perception of Andalusians of the interior, does not in itself mean that their villages and towns are not part of a Mediterranean cultural zone as seen from an etic-anthropological viewpoint. But the fact remains, and that is the first point I wish to make, that an emically relevant Mediterranean category does indeed constitute a convenient starting point for a discussion of the cultural boundaries of the Mediterranean world.

During my third fieldwork experience in 1984, 'Mediterranean' did indeed become an imperative reality and mental category. Small wonder,

Melilla, the Spanish enclave in Morocco where I conducted research, juts into the Mediterranean sea. Most of its inhabitants — Christians, Jews, Muslims and Hindus alike — were living with their faces towards the sea and their backs turned to the Moroccan hinterland. In this port society 'Mediterranean' was frequently used as a metaphor, for instance in the ideology of *convivencia* celebrated by the local elite. They never got tired declaring to outsiders, anthropologist included, that the peaceful co-existence of Christians, Muslims and Jews was itself a manifestation of the strength of Mediterranean civilization (Driessen 1992). Briefly put, in Melilla 'Mediterranean-ness' constituted a discourse that transcended religious and ethnic divisions, in particular within the moneyed class.

When I conducted research in the early 1990s on the issue of migration across the Hispano-African frontier, I became aware of yet another way in which the category 'Mediterranean' was being used by Mediterraneans themselves. The northern fringe of Morocco, inhabited by Berbers, has been a forgotten frontier for centuries, far removed from the economic, political and cultural centres of the Atlantic plains. In the eyes of Arab citydwellers this area carries a whole range of negative associations: poverty, violence, smuggling, subordination and emigration. But 'Mediterranean' is recently being used in a positive sense by young Berbers in northern Morocco and abroad (for instance, in Spain and the Netherlands), particularly by those who propagate their Berber identity. The same holds true for the Kabyle Berbers of Algeria and in France, at least for the activists among them who proclaim a secular Mediterranean identity. They fiercely resent and oppose state emphasis on Arab-Islamic identity dimensions. These people thus use 'Mediterranean' as a notion of opposition against Arab domination (Driessen 1998).

To give yet another example. Catalans of Barcelona tend to consider themselves as a Mediterranean people *par excellence* (as do the Maltese), stressing the values of open-mindedness, cosmopolitanism, enterprising spirit, and cultural refinement. This Mediterranean self-image was strongly celebrated during the Olympic Games when Barcelona and Catalonia, and not Spain, became a focus of world attention. In sum, Catalans use the category of 'Mediterranean' partly in opposition to Castilian domination, identifying themselves against the pastoral-agrarian tradition of central Spain and its presumed inward-orientedness. A final instance refers to the use of 'Mediterranean' as a political orientation in present-day Turkey. Accomodating seemingly contrary notions, 'Mediterranean' provides a plausible alternative identification to people who wish to distance themselves from extreme nationalist and islamist groups (Ors 1998).

To my view, it is not only worth while but also necessary to map such local uses of 'Mediterranean' — the meanings of which are generated in a semantic field composed of other categories such as 'Atlantic', 'Balkan', 'Europe', 'Africa', 'Orient'. In fact, there have been useful contributions in this regard from anthropology since the mid-1980s (Moreno Navarro

1986; Albera 1988; Piña-Cabral 1989; Sant-Cassia 1991; Baskar 1995; Vale de Almeida 1996).

### **Braudel's Mediterranean**

Fernand Braudel was quick to acknowledge the primacy of defining the limits of the Mediterranean. In the preface to the first edition he wrote: "The question of boundaries is the first to be encountered; from it all others flow." Taking ecology as "the deep bone-structure" of the Mediterranean, he set out to define the coasts and shores as the "heart" of the Mediterranean world. Braudel also hastened to point out the complexity of the Mediterranean: "The Mediterranean speaks with many voices; it is a sum of individual histories." He dealt with "overlapping civilizations" (Turks in the eastern Balkan plains and Moriscos in Spain), with the "greater Mediterranean" (for instance, the Sahara or the Black Sea), and cultural cleavages. Unfortunately, Braudel never took pains to specify the substance of "cultural". Without further specification the notion of unity and diversity is a conceptual dead-end-street.

### **The unity-and-diversity topos**

Braudel, in fact, was not the first scholar to make use of the 'Mediterranean unity-and-diversity' topos. It did not come out of the blue but already existed as a notion in the scripturalist, classicist, humanistic tradition of western Europe. It entered Anglophone Mediterranean ethnography through Julian Pitt-Rivers (1963) who used it to reject the nation-state and national culture as observational and analytical units. John Davis (1977) also employed this topos to get away from the nation-state towards the supranational Mediterranean area.

A perfect illustration of the early use of the unity-and-diversity idea is an essay "The Unity and Diversity of the Mediterranean World", published more than sixty years ago. It has, as far as I know, never been referred to in the circles of Mediterraneanists. Even Braudel, Davis, Gilmore and Herzfeld, well-informed about Anglophone literature on the Mediterranean, did not mention it. I stumbled upon this remarkable essay while preparing a paper for a conference on "Anthropology and the Mediterranean: Unity, Diversity, and Perspectives" held in Aix-en-Provence in 1997 (note again the 'unity-and-diversity' topos). Its author is Belgian-born George Sarton, who left war-torn Europe for the USA in 1915 to pursue a lifelong study of the history of science. He lectured at Harvard and wrote the massive and widely acclaimed *Introduction to the History of Science* (3 vols. 1927-1947).

Sarton was primarily interested in the Mediterranean world in the Middle Ages and claimed to deal mostly with sources in Arabic. The essay has indeed an 'oriental' or more precisely a Levantine bias. He spent

considerable time in Lebanon and stressed what he called "our eastern origins and our eastern borrowings". He travelled all around the Mediterranean sea to witness that "great geographical and historical reality" and became convinced of "the unity of the Mediterranean world". In his own words:

That unity is somewhat eclipsed by the traditional division of the ancient world into three main parts: Europe, Asia and Africa. Now each of these continents has its own characteristics, but none is as completely a physical and human unit as the Mediterranean region where they all meet, and which is made up of fragments of each (the mosaic view, comment by H. D.)... the diversity of Mediterranean lands was endless and yet each bore unmistakably the Mediterranean imprint. That is why I like to speak of the unity and diversity of Mediterranean culture, the two words unity and diversity truly inseparable (Sarton 1936:408).

Sarton heralds and outlines all major Braudelian themes in his emphasis on geography, ecology, climate, communications; on "the Mediterranean Sea as a catchment basis and distributing center not only of material wares but of ideas"; on trade, travelling and conquest; on the "collective destiny of the Mediterranean"; on "sequences of events" and continuity, in fact a precursor of the Braudelian triad event-conjuncture-structure. To be sure, there are also differences between Sarton and Braudel. The former's perspective is that of a cultural historian, predominantly interested in language, religion and architecture, whereas Braudel was pre-eminently a social-economic, if not 'total', historian. Sarton was much more celebratory regarding Mediterranean diffusion and syncretism than Braudel.

Although Sarton used a present-day perspective at several points in his essay, his interest in the Mediterranean world was primarily of an antiquarian nature. Though he claimed to have extensively travelled around the Mediterranean sea, he must have done so mainly as a cultured monument-hopping tourist. The 'Mediterranean-as-the-nursery-if-not-the-cradle-of-our-civilization' cliché looms large in his contribution. Michael Herzfeld, discussing the Greek case, aptly summarized the antiquarian view as follows:

If this (Mediterranean) region is ancestral to 'us', it is removed from us through mythic time; if merely exotic, then its distance is one of cultural space. In either case, it is 'not us', even though we claim it as 'our own'. Its paradoxical status lies in the Eurocentric ideology rather than in anything intrinsic to the region itself (1987:7).

### **Anthropologists haunted by 'isms'**

The fieldworker is thus confronted with a whole series of 'isms' — Eurocentrism, Balkanism, Orientalism, nationalism and other variations on ethnocentrism — which are inevitably carried to Mediterranean

fieldwork sites both by 'foreign' and 'indigenous' ethnographers. Moreover, there is a constant tension between the general and the particular, one of the persistent complications of anthropological fieldwork, also in Mediterranean ethnography. A third formidable complication is the continuous shift and change of external and internal Mediterranean boundaries, and, by implication the fluidity of cultural figurations in and beyond the region. And what about the limits of the supposed Mediterranean 'unity' in a world where the scale and speed of the movement of people, goods, ideas, and meanings has enormously increased since Braudel's long sixteenth century in spite of rather strict international borders? The Mediterranean world has undeniably moved much closer, in spite of cleavages, to for instance, the Netherlands since World War II. Elements of local Mediterranean life styles have entered the Dutch consumer market as commodities — food (pasta, couscous, olive oil), drinks (wine), dances (flamenco, belly-dance), music (rai, zarzuela, rebetika, rif-flamenco, classical Andalusian music from the Maghreb), architecture (patio, arch construction, loggia, pastel colours), and labour. Dutch culture travelled southwards influencing life in the Mediterranean region: tourists, Heineken, Dutch tolerance in matters of sex and soft drugs, Philips electronics, and football players and coaches.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, these examples seem to be rather superficial and trivial. Yet, one is tempted, in the light of such evidence, to recoin the culture concept in favour of a more dynamic and less bounded notion. Several prominent anthropologists have in fact been trying to do so during the past fifteen years. In view of the interconnectedness of human aggregates, Eric Wolf (1982) made a plea to view culture as a series of processes. James Clifford (1988) focused on culture as representation and collage, as interactive, open-ended, processual and as juxtaposition. More recently, he (1997) embraced "translocal culture" as the result of movement and contact zones. Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) writes against culture as coherent, timeless and discrete, instead propagating an "ethnography of the particular". Or consider the concept of "cultural flow" proposed by Ulf Hannerz (1992), consisting of "externalizations of meaning which individuals produce through arrangements of overt forms". Does all this mean that we can do without the culture concept? I agree with Hannerz that "it is still the most useful key word we have to summarize that peculiar capacity of human beings for creating and maintaining their own lives together, and to suggest the usefulness of a fairly free-ranging kind of inquiry into the ways people assemble their lives" (1996:43).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> While writing this paper Barcelona Football Club has 7 Dutch players, a Dutch coach and assistant under contract; two more Dutchmen are on the wish list. This seems to cause a kind of a culture conflict.

<sup>2</sup> Also see Susan Wright (1997) for an excellent overview.

### **Mediterranean reality or fiction?**

Let us then accept as a starting point that the region we call 'Mediterranean' has been constantly remade and influenced by forces within and beyond its geo-political borders. Recently, the Mediterranean Basin has again become an area of friction between the northern and southern shores. Differences in income level, standards of living and economic development are on the increase. The so-called demographic gap is widening: the population growth in North Africa is ten times that in the European Union. The Mediterranean is not only a political, economic and demographic divide, but also a moral and ideological frontier, increasingly perceived by European Unionists as a watershed between freedom, democracy and secularism on the one hand, and repression, dictatorship and religious and nationalist fanaticism on the other. The deepening of the Mediterranean divide is intimately related to the process of integration in the European Union, the (partial) abolition of its internal borders and the reinforcement of the external frontiers.

Also in other parts of the Mediterranean world a redrawing of boundaries is taking place. Following the breakdown of Yugoslavia and the communist bloc, a reshuffling of the 'Mediterranean', 'Europe', 'Balkan', 'Middle East' categories and a reshaping of national identities have been in full swing. Old lines of division between East and West are being reinforced, in particular in this part of Europe.

Besides division there is also contact and intermingling. One would wish to agree with the following too optimistic conclusion of a journalist's odyssey in the circum-Mediterranean world:

With the movement of peoples from the southern shores into the north, and the need for their work and skills there, the Mediterranean is now becoming an integral part of Europe itself. No longer can it be dismissed as Europe's inconvenient annexe, part of the precarious passage to India, or the sun patio for occasional and casual use by northern hedonists and tourists. The new Mediterraneans and Mediterranean ways are firmly with us (Fox 1991:525).

Similar voices are diffused through the medium of Internet where, for instance, a 'Mediterranean Culture' site claims that it "offers a vast collection of links on the Mediterranean region, particularly in the sphere of international relations, with the purpose of strengthening mutual understanding and *common Mediterranean identity elements* (my emphasis), as well as facilitating access to information" (<http://www.ctv.es/users/strella/medcult.htm>). Of course, the anthropological question is: do such 'common Mediterranean identity elements' exist, and, if so, of what do they consist — are they, for instance, shared historical circumstances and a number of common key symbols? — and more important yet, if they do exist, how do the common elements interrelate?

### Consequences

What does all this mean for ethnographic research in Mediterranean societies? I think we should stop searching for the essence of Mediterranean life, or for that matter, 'Mediterranean unity', the Grail of many professional travellers, anthropologists included. Pitt-Rivers, Davis, Gilmore, Boissevain could not find it, nor could the much more mobile Paul Theroux in his present-day version of the Grand Tour. On the other hand Abu-Lughod's and Herzfeld's 'ethnography of the particular' is the fastest and easiest way out of the Mediterraneanist dilemma. In my eyes, this is a short-term option, far too easy and thus not satisfactory.

Ethnology or anthropology should aim at statements going beyond local settings. But how to compare and generalize without treading on paths paved with stereotypes? At the end of the 1970s John Davis and Jeremy Boissevain urged us to adopt a pan-Mediterranean comparative perspective. My opinion at that time (1981) was that such a perspective was a bridge too far, going from one extreme — that of holistic-descriptive village studies — to another — that of sweeping generalizations. I argued then that there is a middle ground of within-nation and within-region comparisons on themes such as urban ethos, masculinity, cult of holy men and women, family structure, to be explored before going into inter-regional comparisons (for instance, the cult of saints in Latin Europe and North Africa). Although I have become sceptical about within-nation comparisons, my position still is that one cannot seriously write about Moroccan, Spanish or Jordan society/communities (and Andalusian, Rifian and Bedouin culture for that matter) without at least discussing such hard to pin down entities as



'Mediterranean', 'Europe' or 'Middle East', and, of course, mapping and comparing local definitions of such entities. This includes furthering a comparative perspective within and beyond cultural zones (loosely defined), careful reassessments of earlier work (Braudel included, in particular in view of the vast material from Ottoman archives available now on CD-rom and Internet) and substantial cooperative projects between 'foreign' and 'local' ethnographers.

So, summing up, we may conclude that our study of the repertoire of the category 'Mediterranean', should move away from endless and sterile debates about traits — essential or not — towards a more dynamic discussion of the politics of cultural identification. Indeed, some people define themselves at certain moments and in some contexts as 'Mediterranean', not as Moroccan, Catalan, Jewish or Berber. The category 'Mediterranean' is not solidly uniform. On the other hand, it would be presumptuous or arrogant to deny matters Mediterranean. The anthropologist who claims that Mediterranean culture does not exist, neglects that for many different actors 'Mediterranean' *is* a cultural reality. People use it as an argument for economic cooperation within the region, as a positive self-image (hospitality, warm sociability as opposed to the social coldness of the north), or as a negative stereotype (corruption, clan-mentality). In all these instances such conceptions *do* influence social actions.

#### REFERENCES CITED

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1991. "Writing Against Culture". In *Recapturing Anthropology. Working in the Present*. Richard G. Fox, ed. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 137-163.
- Albera, Dionigi. 1988. "Open Systems and Closed Minds: The Limitations of Naïvety in Social Anthropology — A Native's View". *Man (N. S.)* 23:435-452.
- Baskar, Bojan. 1995. "Northeast Entrance into the Mediterrenean." In *Mediterranean Ethnological Summer School*. Borut Brumen & Zmago Šmitek, eds. Ljubljana: Slovene Ethnological Society, 71-84.
- Braudel, Fernand. 1976. *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. 2 vols. Glasgow: Fontana - Collins.
- Clifford, James. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

- Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Davis, John. 1977. *People of the Mediterranean. An Essay in Comparative Social Anthropology*. London: Routledge - Kegan Paul.
- Driessen, Henk. 1981. "Anthropologists in Andalusia: The Use of Comparison and History". *Man (N. S.)* 16:451-62.
- Driessen, Henk. 1992. *On the Spanish-Moroccan Frontier. A Study in Ritual, Power and Ethnicity*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Driessen, Henk. 1998. "The 'New Immigration' and the Transformation of the European-African Frontier". In *Border Identities. Nation and State at International Frontiers*. Thomas M. Wilson & Hastings Donnan, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 96-117.
- Fox, Robert. 1991. *The Inner Sea. The Mediterranean and Its People*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson.
- Hannerz, Ulf. 1992. *Cultural Complexity. Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hannerz, Ulf. 1996. "When Culture is Everywhere: Reflections on a Favorite Concept". In Ulf Hannerz: *Transnational Connections. Culture, People, Places*. London: Routledge, 30-44.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 1987. *Anthropology Through the Looking-Glass. Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [HTTP://WWW.CTV.ES/USERS/STRELLA/MEDCULT.HTM](http://WWW.CTV.ES/USERS/STRELLA/MEDCULT.HTM)
- Moreno Navarro, Isidoro. 1986. "Fieldwork in Southern Europe and Scientific Colonisation: The Andalusian Case". Braga. Paper Presented at the Thirteenth European Congress for Rural Sociology.
- Ors, Ilay Berna. 1998. "Ambiguity in Identity: 'Mediterranean' as Consumption and Political Orientation in Turkey". Philadelphia. Paper Presented at the Conference of the American Anthropological Association.
- Piña-Cabral, João de. 1989. "The Mediterranean as a Category of Regional Comparison: A Critical View". *Current Anthropology* 30:399-406.
- Pitt-Rivers, Julian. 1963. *Mediterranean Countrymen*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Sant-Cassia, Paul. 1991. "Authors in Search of a Character: Personhood, Agency and Identity in the Mediterranean". *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 1:1-17.
- Sarton, George. 1936. "The Unity and Diversity of the Mediterranean World". *Osiris. Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 2:406-63.
- Theroux, Paul. 1995. *The Pillars of Hercules. A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Vale de Almeida, Miguel. 1996. *The Hegemonic Male. Masculinity in a Portuguese Town*. Providence - Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Wolf, Eric R. 1982. *Europe and the People Without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.